

REDUCE THE
AIR MAIL
RATES

*Cheap Postage
Pays*

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REDUCE THE AIR MAIL RATES!

The future of this country as a civil air power may be assured to a considerable extent by nothing more nor less trifling than a postage stamp. This fact is so simple as to savour of the fantastic. But it is true—and there is not a civilian air expert with a full knowledge of figures and affairs who will deny it

A reduction to a low flat rate of the air carriage of all letters between those parts of the Empire served by aircraft would revolutionise our air transport and, without any eventual loss to the Exchequer and Post Office—which in any event makes surpluses with monotonous regularity—confer enormous advantages on the industrial community and the Empire as a whole

At the present moment air letter rates to India and South Africa and other parts of the Empire are both varied and heavy. They are fixed on a basis divorced altogether from the consideration of profit and loss on mail transport by other means, although it is well known that the carriage of a letter from, say, London to Ottawa for threehalfpence is made possible by the profit on the carriage, for the same rate, of a letter from one part of a city to another in an adjoining suburb. Air mails do not come within the scope of this 'law of averages'

PRESENT TRAFFIC INSUFFICIENT

At the present moment civil aviation is fighting against severe handicaps. It draws the bulk of its financial support from subsidies, yet the amount of assured freight in both passengers and goods is insufficient to warrant any heavy outlay on new machine construction, new route planning, or the inauguration of faster and more frequent regular services. The Post Office itself, moreover, estimates that only 10 per cent of the letter mails between this country and the Dominions and Colonies can stand any surcharge, however small, for accelerated delivery. This means that until air mail rates are reduced, civil aviation will only carry 250 tons of Empire letters a year—a none too encouraging outlook

Despite these discouragements, however, civil aviation has worked wonders with the Empire routes. There are regular services to the Near East, India and South Africa; plans are far advanced for a service to Australia, while, pending the establishment of the inevitable trans-Atlantic route, ship-cum-air services will reduce the letter-distance between this country and Canada to between three and four days. What has been achieved, however, is only the measure of what could be done if mail rates were cut and civil aviation given the assured freight by which alone it can accelerate its development

History holds many precedents for the influence of concessions in small things. A trading charter to a private company to deal in furs opened up the whole of Western Canada. A more relevant instance is the introduction of the penny post by Hill in 1840. The step was attacked with as much ill-informed savagery as any comparable air-mail concession could be to-day. Yet it turned out to be the greatest impetus to the development of internal communication ever afforded, and established the prestige of the British Post Office throughout the world. Immediately before Hill's great step the number of letters handled by the Post Office was 80,000,000. The following year they rose to 170,000,000, and by 1870 the figure was 800,000,000

Rowland Hill's innovation required much greater courage than our authorities would need to-day if they wished to make such pleasant history repeat itself. It cost 4d. to send a letter from London to Hampstead, and 1s. 5d. to dispatch a missive from Aberdeen to Dover. Hill cut it to one penny and revolutionised communication, transport and, in some degree, industry itself

Cheap postage has always been a paying proposition. As long ago as the days of Elizabeth the city companies did well by acting as couriers. When Charles I was king, Thomas Witherings reaped vast profits by operating a sketchy postal service at low rates. His charge for delivering a London letter on the borders of Scotland, for example, was only 8d., while Ireland could be tackled for 9d. But the prize for vindicating the principle of cheapness must go to William Dockwra who, concentrating on London, *established a penny post in 1690*. He gave to all who could write and read a service which London has not enjoyed since. There were eight deliveries a day to residential districts and twelve to the commercial sections! It was so profitable that the system was taken over by the Government—and poor Dockwra, for some unaccountable reason, was fined

Taking an example from British air history itself, those with long—or short—memories might be reminded that when the first regular air mail was established in 1919, between London and Paris, the charge was 2s. 6d. an ounce. This was, of course, prohibitive, but when it was reduced after a few months to the almost incredible sum of 2d., there were shoutings and protests from the Jeremiahs. Yet the reduction justified itself in a very short time, and it is not too much to say that directly and indirectly the popularity of the London-Paris route owed much to the initial impetus and publicity of its mail facilities. The vast air networks of to-day sprang from that trans-Channel service

Quite apart from historic precedent, the plain facts of the present state of air development claim sympathetic consideration for the introduction of a low flat air-letter rate. The public has everything to gain and nothing to lose. Shipping companies could hardly raise serious objection. They are paid by the Post Office not by weight of the mails but by the space the mails occupy, which on Imperial routes is really very small compared with the space occupied by the heavy freight and parcels which they would still retain

NOBODY'S BABY

If there is, indeed, any financial risk involved, the Post Office can well afford it. After all, it is there for the purpose not of making surpluses of many millions a year, but of giving the public the best possible service at the lowest possible price. Yet in justice to this Department it may be said that the adjustment of the mail rates is not entirely its concern. The Treasury and the Air Ministry, as the Financier and Godfather respectively of civil aviation, must have a say in it too

But they would also benefit by a reduction. The Treasury would see civil aviation on the way to independence; the Air Ministry would see an acceleration of the development of air routes and aircraft construction, as well as a huge advance in the air-mindedness of the people. And do not let us forget this: civil aviation is becoming one of the most competitive of all fields of international activity. The air is the road and sea and rail of the future, and our very existence depends upon the assurance of our efficient control of our own flying destinies. No effort must be spared to encourage the expansion and regularity of our services, and by no means can that be accomplished more certainly than by providing profitable freight

The Parliamentary Air Committee, of which I have the honour of being Chairman, has laid this matter of a flat rate for air mail letters before the Postmaster-General, and with his usual promptness he has promised me that the matter shall be looked into. It is to be hoped speedy decisions will be made. The case is clear; the cause is worthy, the need is urgent

And what, moreover, of the air mail stamp? Although we are one of the pioneer air countries, we see many nations boasting this pleasant and profitable little luxury which we deny ourselves. They must make a revenue out of them or they would not be issued at all. If a profit, no matter how small, can be made by the introduction of an air stamp, the Postmaster-General is not keeping his great name for efficiency if he does not exploit this new avenue for raising revenue. Members of the staff of the G.P.O. themselves have informed me that their duties would be lightened by the introduction of air mail stamps, while the joy of philatelists goes without saying. This issue, however, is subordinate to the supremely important one of air mail charges as a whole

Bring them down and the whole Empire will benefit!

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